

Frank Viola: 6 Points Commending and Criticizing MacArthur's Charismatic Blasting

Having read both *Charismatic Chaos* and *Strange Fire*, I want to cut to the chase in this introduction and tell you where I think **John MacArthur** is dead-on and where I think his conclusions are flawed and even outrageous.

Then I'd like to offer you the full version of my critique, which you can request at the end of this article. The full version of my critique provides evidence and examples supporting each point.

1. The charismatic world is an easy target for any critic because there are a lot of problems within the camp.

There's no doubting that a number of high-profile charismatic leaders are guilty of outlandish teachings, absurd practices, stunts, gimmicks, exaggerations and even fraud. And so are many of their followers.

But MacArthur isn't the only person who has made this observation. Many **charismatic** leaders have as well. MacArthur even quotes some of them in *Strange Fire*.

Just as those **charismatic** leaders weren't able to reel in the excesses that exist within the movement, neither will MacArthur's attempts to do so be fruitful toward that end. In fact, MacArthur's latest book is his third attempt on this score (*The Charismatics*, 1978; *Charismatic Chaos*, 1992; *Strange Fire*, 2013).

2. I cut my teeth as a disciple of Jesus in the

Pentecostal/charismatic world, and I know it well. It is true that *many* of the charismatics I've met put the Holy Spirit on the throne and make Jesus a footnote.

I've written extensively about this problem in my books *Revive Us Again*, *Jesus Manifesto* and my blog series "Rethinking the Holy Spirit." I've also addressed the plague of seeking the power of the Spirit (God's hand) over pursuing Jesus Christ (God's face).

However, **charismatics** aren't alone in falling prey to this error. Many Reformed people and evangelicals have also put some *thing* (typically theology, evangelism, apologetics, eschatology, etc.) over and above Jesus Christ. No Christian is immune to this problem.

In fact, in my early Christian life, I was guilty of this very thing on numerous counts without realizing it. See *Deep Ecclesiology: One Man's Journey Into Rediscovering Jesus*, where I tell the story.

3. MacArthur is wrong in that he paints the entire charismatic world—which would include all charismatics and all charismatic churches—with the same broad brush.

The fact is, I've met many charismatics who were *not* guilty of any of the problems that MacArthur benightedly lays at their feet.

For example, the late **David Wilkerson** was a tremendous help to me personally when I was in my 20s. He encouraged me to make Christ, not the Holy Spirit, preeminent in my life. Wilkerson—a charismatic leader—wrote a classic article called "A Christless Pentecost" on this subject.

I'd encourage anyone who buys MacArthur's arguments to read *The Cross and the Switchblade* and ask yourself if it's *possible* that the supernatural gifts of the Spirit are still operative today.

In addition, I wonder if MacArthur would admit that Teen Challenge, founded by Wilkerson, has been a blessing to many lost young people.

Throughout his books, MacArthur continually says things like, “**Charismatics** believe” such and such, “Charismatics think” such and such, and then, “The charismatic movement is guilty of ... “

This is simply false. It would be accurate to say, “Some charismatics believe,” or even, “Many charismatics believe,” or, “Some in the charismatic movement believe ... “

Using MacArthur’s logic and approach, one could easily write a book about the toxicity of the Reformed movement by painting all Reformed Christians as elitist, sectarian, divisive, arrogant, exclusive and in love with “doctrine” more than with Christ.

And just as MacArthur holds up **Benny Hinn, Todd Bentley, Pat Robertson** and others to characterize the charismatic world, one can hold up R.J. Rushdoony, Herman Dooyeweerd Patrick Edouard and others to characterize Reformed Christians. Or Peter Ruckman and Jack Hyles to characterize fundamentalist Baptists. Or William R. Crews and L.R. Shelton Jr. to represent Reformed Baptists.

My point is that **charismatic**, Reformed and Baptist people would strongly object to the idea that any of these gentleman could accurately represent their respective tribes, as each of them have strong critics within their own movements.

Even so, the game of burning down Straw Man City with a torch is nothing new.

The people MacArthur highlights as the poster people for charismatics—**Kenneth Copeland, Peter Popoff, Paula White, Bob Jones, E.W. Kenyon, Eddie Long, Oral Roberts, Benny Hinn, Pat Robertson**—simply do not represent the views or practices of

the majority of charismatic Christians.

4. MacArthur misrepresents people.

In *Charismatic Chaos*, MacArthur takes on the late **Kathryn Kuhlman**. But astonishingly, he relies on a critic who used outlandishly deceptive methods of research to accuse her of fraud. When you get to that part of my critique, prepare to descend into grunts and sighs. It's disturbing.

At the end of *Strange Fire*, MacArthur says charismatics acknowledge the gifts of the Spirit ceased after the early church and were only recovered in the 20th century. Well, I've never heard a **charismatic** teach this, and it's just not accurate. In the critique, you will see multiple quotes by Ante-Nicene and Nicene church fathers, where they bear witness to miracles, healings and the like in their day. There are many more; I just give a sampling.

MacArthur cherry-picks comments from only three church fathers, and one of them doesn't even assert the **gifts of the Spirit** passed away. So quoting two church fathers doesn't represent the mind of the post-apostolic early church on this issue by any stretch.

5. MacArthur makes statements that smell of elitism, sectarianism and judgmentalism.

He says **charismatics** do not have the "true gospel" and that the "spirit behind them is not the Holy Spirit." But that's not all. MacArthur bulbously claims the **charismatic movement** "was a farce and a scam from the outset" and accuses it of being a "false church" (*Strange Fire*, Advanced Reader Copy, p. xix). He then rallies the troops saying, "This is the time for the true church to respond."

Really? MacArthur is part of the "true church," and those poor **charismatics** are part of the "false church," which is driven by a spirit other than the **Holy Spirit**?

These vitriolic statements suggest that **charismatic Christians** are not true followers of Jesus.

In addition, MacArthur insinuates the charismatic “movement is characterized by worldly priorities and fleshly pursuits” (*Strange Fire*, Advanced Reader Copy, p. 57). Hmm ... so David Wilkerson, Dr. Michael Brown, Adrian Warnock, Francis Frangipane and Jack Hayford (and their followers) are/were worldly and fleshly?

Really?

MacArthur accuses charismatics of being “obsessed with the supposed gifts and power of the **Holy Spirit**” (*Strange Fire*, Advanced Reader Copy, p. 53). By the same token, one could say that all Reformed people are obsessed with Calvin’s doctrine. But neither comment is fair nor accurate.

6. MacArthur’s argument that the supernatural gifts of the Spirit have ceased is not only biblically and historically untenable, but it is discounted by the best New Testament evangelical scholars in the world, both past and present.

I’m speaking of N.T. Wright, Ben Witherington, Gordon Fee, Craig Keener and many others.

MacArthur is right to say the Holy Spirit is indeed dishonored when people engage in fleshly mayhem and attribute it to the Spirit of Christ. But I’d argue the Spirit is also grieved and dishonored when a genuine work of God’s Spirit is attributed to Satan.

The fact is, God sometimes comes in ways that make it easy for us to reject Him. (For biblical examples, see “A Vanishing God.”)

Elsewhere, I’ve made the argument that the **Pentecostal** and charismatic movements were born with several birth defects from which they have never recovered. **Frank Bartleman**, an

eyewitness to the **Azusa Street revival**, warned about this (see *Azusa Street*).

But that doesn't make the entire movement false or without spiritual value. The Reformation was also born with certain birth defects that remain today.

Note that I have no ill will toward MacArthur. I don't know him, and I dare not judge his motives. (It is serious sin to impute bad intentions to another person's heart.)

Again, I am not a **charismatic** nor the son of a charismatic. And I agree with many of MacArthur's criticisms (including his issues with the "New Apostolic Movement"). I also concur with his analysis of what accompanies the Holy Spirit's work (exalting Jesus, confirmed by Scripture, loving others, etc.).

And I've articulated these points myself in public writings.

But ... I believe MacArthur destroys his own effectiveness and impact by distorting an otherwise valid critique with misrepresentations, straw man arguments, uncharitable vitriol and weak hermeneutics.

If MacArthur had written *Strange Fire* without the misrepresentations, vitriol, elitism and broad-brushed associations, it would have been a good book in my opinion and one that I could possibly recommend.

To get Frank Viola's entire critique, fill out this form. It will be sent to you by email before November 1.

Frank Viola *has helped thousands of people around the world to deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ and enter into a more vibrant and authentic experience of church. He has written many books on these themes, including God's Favorite Place on Earth and From Eternity to Here. His blog, Beyond Evangelical, is rated one of the most popular in Christian circles today.*